

XAVIER CUGAT

Xavier Cugat is a name that is not as familiar today as it once was, but his role in popularizing Latin-American music in the United States was enormous and it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that he was the Ricky Martin of his day: the glamorous era of Hollywood and Gotham in the 1930's and 40's. Born in Gerona, Spain, his family moved to Havana when Cugat was a young boy. As Fate would have it, one of his neighbors was a violin maker who crafted a miniature version of the instrument that would become Cugat's ticket to Fame. He showed so much talent as a violinist that by the time he was seventeen, he was one of the first instrumental soloists to be broadcast on the radio. After a second career as a cartoonist and caricaturist, he found himself in Los Angeles in the mid-1920's and fell in with the Latino crowd of the film industry and took up the violin once more. Legend has it that Cugat was Rudolph Valentino's favorite player; Valentino insisted that Cugat be on all of his film sets to play romantic music to set the mood for his passionate love scenes. In short time, Cugat formed a combo to play Latin-American music at the fashionable Coconut Grove nightclub and found immediate success- audiences were captivated by the exotic rhythms and sounds of this music that made them shake their hips in an entirely new way. Cugat gained a reputation for being a very shrewd businessman and that talent took him very far: his Hollywood connections helped his orchestra climb to the top of the entertainment industry, appearing in thirteen MGM musicals, weekly radio broadcasts and a sixteen year engagement at the Waldorf Astoria hotel in what became known as "Cugat's Room." Along the way, the orchestra introduced songs that became Latin-American standards, often sung by Cugat's series of bombshell wives: Carmen Castillo, Lorraine Allen, Abbe Lane. He also launched the careers of such iconic performers as Desi Arnaz, Tito Puente, Miguelito Valdes and Charo. His recipe for success was a splashy floor show that included the orchestra in colorful costumes, the singers and dancers to excite the audience and demonstrate the latest Latin-American dances. He may not have single-handedly introduced Latin-American music to this country, but he was one of the greatest promoters of the style and helped pave the way for the artists who followed him.

THE NEW XAVIER CUGAT ORCHESTRA

THE NEW XAVIER CUGAT ORCHESTRA- In 1985, at Ronald Reagan's Inaugural Ball, a Latin-American musical institution was reborn: Xavier Cugat had retired from show business in the 1970's but Reagan wanted to have his favorite band play at the ball. Enter Bob Kasha, a former Big Band pianist and booking agent at the famed Willard Alexander Agency. With the help of none other than Tito Puente, Bob assembled a group of thirteen players led by his wife, Ada Cavallo, who was no stranger to Cugat. She had auditioned for Cugat years earlier. Cugat, being a notorious lady's man, was duly impressed with her vivacity and knock-out figure, but when he learned that her accompanist, Bob, was also her husband, he said, "Thank you so much. I'll be in touch," and that was that. Cut back to 1985. The band is such a success at the Inaugural Ball that Bob decides to approach Cugat with an offer to keep the Cugat name and the fantastic musical arrangements alive, and Cugat says, "Si."

The band went on to tour the U.S. and Japan for many years, with appearances at Disneyland, Disney World, on cruise ships and at major performance venues. Bob and Ada were each inducted into the Big Band Hall of Fame and the band released several CD's of the incomparable charts that had audiences jumping up to the dance floor. As the years went by, Bob and Ada realized that it was time to find a successor to carry the band since they were planning to retire. After trying out several candidates who didn't quite fit the bill, they decided to put it all on hold rather than force the issue with someone who wasn't "it." Fate intervened when they received an announcement

from Hofstra University on Long Island for a show called “Babalu-cy! The Art of Desi Arnaz” that had been created by Cuban-American singer Greg Purnhagen. Bob contacted Greg via the theater and a meeting was arranged. Impressed by Greg’s background, videos and music clips, they went to see the show and decided that Fate had delivered the ideal candidate to take the helm of the orchestra. As Greg likes to point out, there was a wonderful irony in the turn of events: Desi Arnaz, who played a bandleader on “I Love Lucy” got one of his biggest breaks from Cugat. Now once again, “Desi” (Greg), was re-discovered by “Cugat”, (Bob Kasha), and so the musical heritage of Xavier Cugat, which reaches back almost ninety years is being brought to life for an audience who can “hear it again for the first time.”

GREG PURNHAGEN a.k.a. GREG GOMEZ

GREG PURNHAGEN was born in Manhattan and raised in Massapequa Park on Long Island where he did not know Jerry Seinfeld, the Baldwin Brothers or Joey Buttafuoco. Since studying vocal performance at NYU and Mannes College of Music, Greg’s eclectic career has included international touring in several productions with Philip Glass; performances in pieces created by such avant-garde luminaries as Meredith Monk and Anthony Braxton; performances and recordings of sacred music with Musica Sacra and Voices of Ascension; a featured appearance as a guest vocalist on Bjork’s CD *Medulla*; Off-Broadway shows: *Chez Garbo*, *Night Vision*, *The Marilyn Project*; several cast recordings including *Of Thee I Sing* and Mr. Glass’s *Monsters of Grace* and *Hydrogen Jukebox*. In the 90’s he was a member of BMG recording artists Toby Twining Music, touring extensively and making numerous appearances on Garrison Keillor’s *Prairie Home Companion*. Along the way, he has indulged his passion for cabaret and classic musical theater, creating several well-received shows and appearing in revues such as *Rendezvous- An Evening with Piaf, Brel, Aznavour & Friends* (a 2008 MAC nominee) at Feinstein’s at the Regency. *BABALU-CY!- The Art of Desi Arnaz* debuted at Metropolitan Room in 2007, winning a 2008 Backstage Bistro Award in the “Best Theme Show” category and went on to a run at the Actor’s Temple Theater in the theater district. The critics have praised his work calling him “...touching and powerful...” (The New York Times), “...winning and communicative.” (The New Yorker), “...on his way to becoming a hot commodity.” (Backstage), and “...a smooth and easy baritone that romantic songwriters should cherish.” (Cabaret Scenes). In her review of *BABALU-CY!* Jan Wallmann wrote “he should put these songs on a CD,” and he has- the recording, his first solo effort, entitled *Desiderio*, is about to be released. And yes, in spite of the German-Dutch last name, he is Cuban. On his father’s side. It’s a long story.